Means and Ends

The Anarchist Critique of Seizing State Power

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Introduction

The anarchist critique of seizing state power is often caricatured as being based on an abstract moral opposition to the state that ignores the harsh realities we are currently facing. Upon carefully reading historical anarchist authors, however, one discovers that the real reason why they argued that revolutionaries should not seize existing state power was because it was impractical for achieving their goals.

These practical arguments were grounded in their understanding of society. Anarchists held that society was constituted by human beings with particular forms of consciousness engaging in activity – exercising capacities to satisfy motivational drives – and in so doing simultaneously transforming themselves and the world around them. For example, when workers go on strike a number of fundamental transformations can occur. Workers can develop their capacities by learning to engage in direct action and self-direct their lives; acquire new motivational drives such as the desire to stand up to their boss or become a dues paying member of a union; and transform their forms of consciousness, by which I mean the particular ways in which they experience, conceptualise and understand the world, such as coming to view their boss as a class enemy or realising that to improve their situation they have to collectively organise with other workers. Through engaging in such activity workers not only transform themselves but also develop new social relations. They form bonds of mutual support and solidarity with fellow workers while they transform the social conditions under which they live, such as earning better wages or making their boss afraid of them. This is often called the theory of praxis or practice and it is one of the many theoretical commitments that anarchists and Marx have in common.

The Social Reproduction of Libertarian Communism

For anarchists one of the main consequences of the theory of practice was that there is an inherent connection between means and ends. The end goal of anarchism – free or libertarian communism – is a stateless classless society in which workers collectively own the means of production and self-manage their workplaces and communities through councils in which everyone has a vote and a direct say in the decisions that affect them. These councils would coordinate action over large areas by associating together into a decentralised system of regional, national and international federations in which as many decisions as possible were made by the local councils themselves. This would be achieved through regular congresses at a regional, national and international level which would be attended by instantly recallable mandated delegates that councils elected to represent them. Crucially, delegates would not be granted the power to make decisions independently and impose them on others. Decision making power would remain in the hands of the council who had elected them.

Such a society would be reproduced over time by human beings engaging in these forms of activity and in so doing continuously creating and re-creating both communist social relations and themselves as people with the right kinds of capacities, drives and forms of consciousness for a communist society. For example, under communism workers within their local councils would make decisions through a system of direct democracy in which every member has a vote. Through participating in these local councils they would not only make decisions but also reproduce themselves as people who are able to and want to make decisions in this manner, such as

being able to effectively take minutes, formulate proposals that people will support and make sure that a small minority of people do not do all the talking in meetings.

People who want to and are able to reproduce a communist society will not magically come into existence. A communist society can only emerge through a social revolution that abolishes capitalism and therefore will have to be created by the people who presently live under capitalism. Given this, in order to achieve a communist society the majority of the population has to engage in activities during the struggle against capitalism itself that transform them into people who want to and are able to self-direct their lives and their community through local councils and federations of councils. If this does not happen, then communism will not be created. This is because for communism to exist real people must establish and reproduce it day after day through their own activity.

Revolutionaries therefore have to use means that are constituted by forms of practice that will actually transform individuals into the kinds of people who will be able to and want to create the end goal of communism. If revolutionaries make the mistake of using the wrong or inappropriate means then they will produce people who will create a different society to one they initially intended. To quote Malatesta,

> it is not enough to desire something; if one really wants it adequate means must be used to secure it. And these means are not arbitrary, but instead cannot but be conditioned by the ends we aspire to and by the circumstances in which the struggle takes place, for if we ignore the choice of means we would achieve other ends, possibly diametrically opposed to those we aspire to, and this would be the obvious and inevitable consequence of our choice of means. Whoever sets out on the highroad and takes a wrong turning does not go where he intends to go but where the road leads him.[1]

The State as a Social Structure

Anarchists viewed seizing state power as a road that would lead the working class to a new form of authoritarian class society, rather than the intended goal of communism. To understand why we need to first understand what anarchists meant by the state. Through an in-depth analysis of the state as an actually-existing social structure, both historically and at the time they were writing, anarchists came to define the state as a hierarchical and centralized institution that uses professionally organized violence to perform the function of reproducing class rule. The state so understood was wielded by a political ruling class (generals, politicians, high ranking civil servants, monarchs, etc) in their own interests, and in the interests of the economic ruling class (capitalists, landlords, etc), against the masses. Kropotkin, for example, writes that the state "not only includes the existence of a power situated above society, but also of a territorial concentration and a concentration of many functions in the life of societies in the hands of a few… A whole mechanism of legislation and of policing is developed to subject some classes to the domination of other classes." The state is therefore "the perfect example of a hierarchical institution, devel-

[1] Errico Malatesta, *The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader,* ed. Davide Turcato (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2014), 281–2.

oped over centuries to subject all individuals and all of their possible groupings to the central will. The State is necessarily hierarchical, authoritarian — or it ceases to be the State."[2]

Anarchists argued that the state, like all social structures, is constituted by forms of human activity and so participating in the state produces and reproduces particular kinds of people and particular kinds of social relations. This occurs irrespective of the intentions or goals of people because what matters is the nature of the social structure they are participating in and the forms of activity this social structure is constituted by and reproduced through. For Reclus, socialists who enter the state "have placed themselves in determinate conditions that in turn determine them."[3] Those who wield state power will therefore engage in forms of human activity that will over time transform them into oppressors of the working class who are concerned with reproducing and expanding their power over other people. Anarchists held that this process of socialists being transformed into oppressors would occur both to socialists who are elected into the currently existing capitalist state and also to socialists who attempt to seize the existing state via a coup and transform it into a workers' state.

Anarchists thought this would occur for two main reasons. Firstly, the state is a centralized and hierarchical institution in which a political ruling class monopolize decision making power and determine the lives of the majority who are subject to their rule. The minority of socialists who actually exercise state power will therefore impose decisions on and determine the lives of the working class, rather than enabling the working class to self-direct their own lives. In Malatesta's words,

> Whoever has power over things has power over men; whoever governs production also governs the producers; who determines consumption is master over the consumer. This is the question; either things are administered on the basis of free agreement among the interested parties, and this is anarchy; or they are administered according to laws made by administrators and this is government, it is the State, and inevitably it turns out to be tyrannical.[4]

Secondly, through engaging in the activity of wielding state power socialists will be corrupted by their position of authority at the top of a social hierarchy and be transformed into people who will neither want to nor try to abolish their own power over others. According to Reclus,

> Anarchists contend that the state and all that it implies are not any kind of pure essence, much less a philosophical abstraction, but rather a collection of individuals placed in a specific milieu and subjected to its influence. Those individuals are raised up above their fellow citizens in dignity, power, and preferential treatment, and are consequently compelled to think themselves superior to the common people. Yet in reality the multitude of temptations besetting them almost inevitably leads them to fall below the general level.[5]

[2] Peter Kropotkin, *Modern Science and Anarchy*, ed. Iain McKay (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2018), 234, 227. Kropotkin claims that the state is necessarily centralized and hierarchical multiple times in this text. See: ibid, 199, 275, 310.

[3] Elisée Reclus, *Anarchy, Geography, Modernity: Selected Writings of Elisée Reclus,* ed. John Clark and Camille Martin (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2013), 147.

[4] Malatesta, *Life and Ideas: The Anarchist Writings of Ericco Malatesta*, ed. Vernon Richards (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2015), 138.

[5] Reclus, *Anarchy, Geography, Modernity*, 122.

The Habit of Commanding

Socialists who enter the state may initially "fervently desire" the abolition of capitalism and the state but "new relationships and conditions change them little by little" until they betray the cause whilst telling themselves that they are advancing it.[6] In short, to quote Bakunin, the "habit of commanding" and "the exercise of power" instill in people both "contempt for the masses, and, for the man in power, an exaggerated sense of his own worth."[7]

A state socialist could object to this argument by claiming that states do not have to be wielded by a minority who constitute a political ruling class. For anarchists such an objection ignores that states are necessarily centralized and hierarchical institutions and so can only be wielded by a minority of individuals at the top who do the actual daily work of exercising power. For Bakunin,

> It is bound to be impossible for a few thousand, let alone tens or hundreds of thousands of men to wield that power effectively. It will have to be exercised by proxy, which means entrusting it to a group of men elected to represent and govern them, which will unfailingly return to all the deceit and subservience of representative or bourgeois rule. After a brief flash of liberty or orgiastic revolution, the citizens of the new State will wake up slaves, puppets and victims of a new group of ambitious men.[8]

It might be argued in response that although these representatives would form a minority they would still be workers and so not constitute a distinct political ruling class. Bakunin replied to this argument by insisting that such individuals are "former workers, who, as soon as they become rulers or representatives of the people will cease to be workers and will begin to look upon the whole workers' world from the heights of the state. They will no longer represent the people but themselves and their own pretensions to govern the people."[9]

For anarchists, the state not only had negative effects on those who wielded its power. It would also harm the vast numbers of people who were subject to it by making them engage in forms of practice that did not develop them into the kinds of people needed for a communist society. This is because instead of learning how to self-organize their lives effectively workers would be subject to the power of a ruling minority and so be forced to do as instructed. They would learn to obey and defer to their superiors rather than to think and act for themselves. Instead of learning how to associate with others as equals they would learn to put those in power on a pedestal and venerate them in just the same way that people under capitalism learn to hero worship so-called 'captains of industry' or political figureheads like the British royal family. As Bakunin wrote, "power corrupts those invested with it just as much as those compelled to submit to it."[10]

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[6] Ibid, 122.

[7] Mikhail Bakunin, *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by the Activist Founder of World Anarchism*, ed. Sam Dolgoff (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 145.

[8] Bakunin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Arthur Lehning(London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), 254–5.

[9] Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, ed. Marshall Shatz(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 178.

[10] Ibid, 136.

The Means and Ends of State Power

Given the above, anarchists concluded that seizing and wielding state power was necessarily based on a *means* — minority rule by a political ruling class — which was incompatible with achieving the *ends* of creating a communist society based on the self-determination of the working class as a whole. In theory, the leadership of the workers' state would organize the withering away and eventual abolition of the state once it was no longer needed to defend the revolution. In reality, however, anarchists predicted decades prior to the Russian revolution that the forms of practice involved in exercising state power would transform genuine committed socialists into tyrants concerned with reproducing and expanding their position of power rather than abolishing it in favor of communism. In *Statism and Anarchy* Bakunin declared that although state socialists claim that "this state yoke, this dictatorship, is a necessary transitional device for achieving the total liberation of the people; anarchy, or freedom, is the goal, and the state, or dictatorship the means", they ignore that "no dictatorship can have any other objective than to perpetuate itself, and that it can engender and nurture only slavery in the people who endure it."[11] The workers' state would claim to be a dictatorship of the proletariat but would in reality, according to Malatesta, "prove to be the dictatorship of 'Party' over people, and of a handful of men over 'Party.'"[12]

[11] Ibid, 179.

[12] Malatesta, *A Long and Patient Work: The Anarchist Socialism of L'Agitazione 1897–1898*, ed. Davide Turcato (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2016), 27.

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